

## **TOTEMISM AMONG OROGUNPEOPLE OF DELTA STATE, NIGERIA**

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**Abstract:** *Religion, as an organised system of beliefs, ceremonies, and rules guiding the services and worship of God/gods or the supernatural, is primarily clothed with the cloak of both the known and the unknown. From time immemorial, totemism has been a relationship between the people of Orogun, Delta State, and a species of certain animals known as the iguana, dog, and tiger. The people of Orogun believe that these totems have immensely contributed to the growth, safety, and moral values of the Orogun kingdom. However, due to the influence of Christianity, western education, and cultural values on the people, many people now believe that totemic practice among the Orogun people is barbaric. This paper aims to show the relevance of totemic practice in contemporary Orogun society, irrespective of these challenges. To achieve this aim, the phenomenological method was used in this research. Data were collected from both primary and secondary sources. The data gathered were analyzed using historical, sociological, and descriptive approaches.*

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**Keywords:** *Orogun people, totemism, Iguana, oral tradition and culture.*

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Totemism is a common phenomenon among many communities in the world. it has been considered a primitive religious practice but there are still traces and practices of this belief in different ways and places in this present age (Abolarin, 2019 p. 107). One of the places in Africa where totems are highly venerated is the Orogun kingdom, a kingdom of the Urhobo ethnic group of Delta State, Nigeria. Generally, totems are seen as sacred objects that symbolize something real for the people who entertain such beliefs (Ndubisi, 2018 p. 26). These objects could be animate or inanimate and have ancestral links to a particular clan, tribe, or group of people. According to Quarcoopome (1987 p. 177), totemistic relationships have diverse origins. In some cases, the belief is that the

clan might have descended from the totem, in other cases it is held that the totem might have done something beneficial for the clan, and it may have its origins connected with the myth of creation. He adds that some animals are chosen because the animals are said to have qualities that the clan members would want to emulate, and such clans identify themselves with such animals. The Orogun people of Delta State belong to this group.

In the Orogun kingdom, there are three totems that the people perceive as sacred animals. These include the Lizard also known as the Iguana, the Dog, and the Tiger (Otite, 2005 p. 280) During the interview, it was noted that totemic practice among the Orogun people From time immemorial till date, has contributed to the growth, safety, and moral values of the kingdom.

Many people of Orogun now see the totemic practice as barbaric and uncultured due to the people's contact with Christianity, globalization, western culture, and education in African societies. The research methods adopted in this study are the historical, sociological, and descriptive methods. The historical method was used to survey and interpret information about totemism in the Orogun kingdom. The descriptive method was used to describe people's attitudes towards totemic practices in the Orogun kingdom. The sociological method enabled the assessment of the relevance of totems from time immemorial to the present age in the society of the Orogun kingdom. More so, there was an interview method in the form of oral communication More than thirty persons ranging from 25 years of age and above were interviewed across the twenty-seven communities of the kingdom. The reason for this age distribution was to bring out the fact about the relevance of totemic practices among the people of the Orogun kingdom. The data gathered were analyzed and qualitatively

interpreted and the findings were weaved into the body of this paper.

## **TOTEMISM AMONG OROGUN PEOPLE**

Orogun is one of the twenty-four kingdoms of the Urhobo ethnic group of Delta State, Nigeria. This kingdom is located in Ughelli North Local Government Area of Delta State (Agbofuodoh et al., 2018 p. 371). The Orogun people speak the Urhobo language and a variant of the Ukwani language, which the denizens themselves refer to as the “Orogun” language (Odivwri 2014 p. 114). One common unique thing among these people is the totemic beliefs and practices. The belief and practice of totems refer to a species of animal, plant, or phenomenon that is venerated by either an ethnic group of people, clan, or family and such people usually refrain from either killing or eating their totem (Sabirova et al, 2020 p. 160; Ikeke and Alumona 2016 p.89 and Benson, 2022 p. 22). A group of people may have multiple totems depending on their myth. For example, according to Otite (2005, p. 280), the totems common with the people of Orogun are three. These include the lizard commonly known as the Iguana (an amphibian reptile that can live on both land and water), Dog, and Tiger.

The People of Orogun perceive the Iguana as their major totem; the physical symbol of their deity called *Erose* while the Dog and tiger are known as minor totems working together as messages to the Iguana. According to Igba (2000 p. 53), these totems have a special religious or spiritual association with the Orogun people. The people never kill or eat nor step on the blood of their totems. It is believed that any Orogun person contravening this sacred edict is believed to be afflicted with leprosy, with rough disfiguring scaly skin, or with severe pains and swelling in the stomach or in that part of the offender's body corresponding to that in which the Iguana is wounded

(Otite, 2005 p. 282). Their respect and acceptability for their totems as an intermediary are not based on kinship consideration only but also on the appreciation of the services rendered in the past to the individual or clan (Isiorhovoja et al, 2011 p.11).

Among the Orogun people, the reptile Iguana is not just a sacred animal, but a recognized 'god' or the deity that the indigenous population worships, and it is therefore treated as the manifestation of the 'god' of the area (see Rim-Rukeh et al, 2013 p. 430 and Anyanwu et al, 2015 p. 175). There is an oral tradition about how the Iguana helped the people of Orogun to cross a dangerously deep river on their way back from a war front. When they got to this river, they could not find their boats but surprisingly saw a group of Iguana emerge and form a bridge from the bank of the river where they were standing to the other end of the river. The warrior who led them to the war courageously stepped on the back of these animals and successfully walked across the dangerous, overflowing river and others trailed behind to a safe place (see Agbofuodoh et al 2018, p. 371 and Rim-Rukeh et al, 2013 p. 430). This was the beginning of the reverence, honor, care, and respect given to this animal.

Dogs are also considered sacred animals among the people of Orogun (Ikeke, 2022, p. 230). According to Otite (2005 p. 281), the dog totem was chosen in a dream by a woman who, according to tradition, was the discoverer of *Erose's* (Orogun god) shrine. People do not eat the meat of dogs even though they keep it domestically. Again, there is an oral tradition about how the people of Orogun went to war leaving all the women and children at home. Unfortunately, enemies of Orogun took a different route to Orogun town to attack their women and children. In the absence of Orogun warriors, dogs fought their enemies and drove them away. Hence, the Dogs became a totem and were

respected as warriors of *Erose* the deity of the people of Orogun (Otite, 2005 p. 282).

The tiger according to oral tradition, is considered the third totemic animal among the Orogun people. The tiger is regarded as a messenger of *Erose* (Orogun deity) which kills but does not itself eat sacrificial animals, chickens, sheep, or goats which are left wondering by the *Erose* shrine (Otite, 2005 p. 281). Like the dog totem, the people of Orogun believe that the tiger totem visits them at night to protect them from their enemies. The people forbid the killing and eating of the meat of a tiger because of the function it performs in the lives of the people. Naturally, the tiger is known to be a strong and dreadful animal and a carnivore. Despite these, it hurts no Orogun person under any circumstance hence the people regard it as their totem animal.

#### **CHALLENGES FACING TOTEMIC PRACTICE AMONG CONTEMPORARY OROGUN PEOPLE**

Currently, there is a belief that totemic practice among the contemporary people of the Orogun kingdom is on the verge of extinction due to the influence of Christianity on the people. Christianity is a foreign religion that was brought to Africa by the missionaries. From its earliest history, this foreign religion has maintained a negative attitude toward the African traditional religion (Adamo, 2009 p. 6). Totemic practice by Africans was among the religious practices that were termed barbaric by the missionaries who lacked the knowledge and understanding of African religion.

With their conversion approach, Christianity was devotedly adopted by many people in Africa (Nwaogaidu, 2020 p. 142; Masoga and Nicolaides, 2021 p. 24). This influence has made many Africans doubt their religious traditions, and subsequently decide to live without them, and that was the inception of secularism in Africa (Metala, 2019 p. 28). The people of the Orogun kingdom were part and parcel of these

experiences. Currently, the majority of the population of the people of Orogun sees totemic practice as fetish, primitive, and barbaric.

During the interview, it was gathered that some of these overzealous Christians in the Orogun community do not have regard for their community totems or the *Erose* (deity) of the land. Some of these Christians today commit atrocities against the land knowing that the belief in the African gods and ancestors (which are renowned for instant justice) has waned seriously; and in their place is the Christian faith whose God is so merciful that judgment is left to the last day (Okpilike, 2012 p. 30).

Westernization has also contributed to the decline of totemic practice in African society in particular among the people of the Orogun kingdom. Westernization is the assimilation of Western ways of life by people of different origins. It is a social process whereby a given society adopts or absorbs Western cultural values at multiple levels of its life (Endong, 2017 p. 53). Apart from foreign religions that were adopted by Africans, Africans have imbibed the Western culture and have appropriated it so much that it now becomes almost part and parcel of their lives. (Clifford, 2018 p. 57). This is the case among the majority of people in the Orogun kingdom who believe in Western culture. Westernization has made many Africans believe that the Western culture is superior to African ways of life. Due to this cultural influence, the people of the Orogun kingdom have abysmally failed to see the beauty and uniqueness of their culture and values most especially their totemic practice which many of them now perceive as fetish and uncultured.

The people of Orogun were also influenced by Western education known as white man education that was inculcated in Africa. Ratzinger (2021, p. 13) avers that for most of the colonial period, education was in the hands of Christian missionaries who sought

not only to convert Africans but also to inculcate Western values on Africans. Due to globalization and Western education in Africa, totemic practices among the the people of Orogun kingdom are gradually being seen as ancient and uncivilized practices by the majority of the Orogun people.

On the other hand, Africans in their quest for literacy sent their children to school with the implication of early exposure of their young ones to the influence of Western culture. These children are taught entirely new things touching all aspects of human existence. Incidentally, these teachings are openly advertised as opposite to the African way of life which is considered barbaric and must be jettisoned. Consequently, these young brains nurtured with Western ways of life and thought could not but accept anything European as superior and better compared to anything African (Madukwe & Madueke, 2010 p. 271).

This is the exact case with many people of the Orogun kingdom. Though western education and globalization have their advantages as Adefarasin and Adefarasin (2023, p. 6) noted in their work on "Impact of Globalization on African Culture". However, western education as practiced in Nigeria has gone out of its way to relegate almost all aspects of African cultural values to the background (Okpilike, 2012 p. 30). One of these rich cultural values that has been affected in Nigeria in particular among the people of the Orogun kingdom is totemic practice. In addition, Kigen (2018, p. 198) thinks that contacts with other tribes or confrontation with another culture, like Christianity, have a great impact on the totemic society. This is the case with the people of Orogun.

## **RELEVANCE OF TOTEMIC PRACTICE TO THE CONTEMPORARY PEOPLE OF OROGUN**

The totemic animal 'Iguana' in the Orogun kingdom is still very much venerated due to their unending role among the people of the Orogun kingdom. The people see their totem Iguana as a symbol of unity. They see themselves as one unified kinsmen and women and they try to live together in close harmony and peace (see Ikeke and Alumona, 2016 p. 94). As such, annually, every fourth month of the year, a festival is instituted in honor of the totem. During these seven days festive periods in the kingdom, all Orogun kinsmen and women return home to unite, rejoice, and celebrate with one another. According to the folklore of the Orogun people, this festive period is so important that it is usually followed by a series of rules and regulations that guide the conduct of everyone in the kingdom. During this period, everyone, irrespective of one current religious life is expected to stay off from farming and any other kind of work. The implication is to accord respect to the totems. Anyone related to the kingdom either by blood or by marriage who violates these norms may experience diseases such as leprosy, rough disfiguring scaly skin, severe pains and swelling stomach, chicken pox, and other deadly diseases that may require cleansing for the victim to get well again.

During the interview, it was gathered that the Iguana hates evil and therefore creates a sense of moral conduct among the people in the kingdom. Also, the people believe that their totem (mainly the Iguana) gives them spiritual and physical power that guides them against their enemies. One of the major sources of spiritual power among the people of Orogun is derived from *Oreh* (native chalk) which is taken as a pill for sick persons. It is also used as prevention against poison in their farmland. In most cases, they add this native chalk to their water pots and whoever plans or speaks evil

against them and drinks their water mixed with native chalk must confess his evil plots. Most importantly, they use this native chalk to fight the forces of sorcery and witchcraft. It was believed that when one hangs native chalk in his home and bears a clear conscience (Holy), it will drive away all witches, wizards, and enemies who fight against them (see Odeka 1982 p. 8). The native chalk is regarded to be very effective and it is obtained from the "*Erose's priest*" (the priest of Orogun gods) normally associated with ritualized actions. During this process, the priest usually calls on the Iguana their totem to imbue its powers into the native chalk.

The totems also act as checks and balances among the people and it are usually done during the seven-day festival every year. The interviewees believe that it is a period when everybody, whatever their status in society is meant to mend his or her ways. It is a time to praise and abuse anybody found wanting of any evil in the community through songs by the kingdom's singers and dancers. It is important to note here that the motive of the singers and dancers is not to insult people per se but to put in check those who violate the rules and regulations guiding the people as approved by the leaders of the kingdom. The people also believe that their totem (Iguana) serves as a source of fertility or fecundity. This happens when an infertile couple partakes in the singing and dancing conducted on the eve of their festival. During this period, the infertile couple participates and asks for blessings from the gods in song. They appeal to the gods of their land represented by the totem (Iguana) to have mercy on them to bear children since none of their relations are barren. To the people of the Orogun kingdom, the Iguana symbolizes weapons of war, protection, and purity.

## **CONCLUSION**

From time immemorial to the present age, totemism has always been the relationship between the people of Orogun and a species of animals known as sacred animals. These sacred animals (Iguana, Dog, and Tiger) are very important to the people of Orogun as a result of their unending role in the Orogun kingdom. Hence the people forbid the hunts and killings of these animals in the kingdom. They respect and venerate these totems. The people believe that irrespective of recent challenges emanating from Christianity, globalization, Western culture, and education facing their totemic practice, the adoration and veneration of totemic animals are still very much active to date in the kingdom. The people of Orogun also believe that these totemic animals always stay with them for life protection both in the physical and spiritual world.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 1) Academic Researchers should try and reconcile what should be changed about totems and retain what is relevant in contemporary society.
- 2) In the spirit of inculturation the core values accorded to totems should be used for the good of the society e.g. respect and dignity of the human person in the spirit of anthropomorphism.
- 3) Individualism and anti-community tendencies whether in Christianity or African Traditional Religion ought to be discouraged precisely because the concepts of good and evil which operate on different levels within and without the communities in Delta State.

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